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Approved For Release 2002/05/07 : CIA-RDP85T00353R000100030001-2

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OCI No. 1014/74
March 8, 1974

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Current Soviet Tactics Vis-a-vis the
Palestinians

There has been no change in Moscow's fundamental equities with respect to the Palestinians. It still views the Palestine question as providing a basis for the assertion of Soviet influence in the Middle East. It should follow then that an increase in Soviet apprehension about their waning influence in the Middle East would be accompanied by renewed Soviet interest in the Palestine question and the fedayeen. Gromyko's meetings with Yasir Arafat last week in Cairo and Damascus provide concrete evidence of just such an equation. In the preceding weeks, the Soviets were keeping a low profile on the Palestine issue, in part because Moscow was still vexed by the fedayeen's inability to get their own house in order and, more importantly, because it had still not decided whom it should support and to what end.

Gromyko's meetings with Arafat and a formal invitation for the PLO chief to visit Moscow indicates that Moscow is beginning to work through to a more definitive Palestine policy, with Arafat as the recognized spokesman for the Palestinians. This is also the first time a Soviet leader has publicly acknowledged meeting with a fedayeen official. In the past, PLO leaders have visited the USSR under the auspices of the "unofficial" Afro-Asian Solidarity Organization, although they have met with high-ranking Soviet officials including party secretary and candidate Politburo member Ponomarev.

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We do not yet know what Gromyko told Arafat. The press has reported that Gromyko assured Arafat that Moscow will not permit the West Bank to revert to Jordan, but it seems unlikely that Gromyko committed Moscow at this time to any specific mechanism for the creation of a Palestinian state. Gromyko may have urged Arafat to push ahead with formation of a government in exile, but recent comments by Soviet diplomats indicate that Moscow still thinks such a proclamation premature. Gromyko sidestepped the PLO recognition issue during his recent visits in Paris and Rome. The Soviets have been urging the Palestinians to first resolve other contentious issues, such as representation at Geneva.

From the Soviet viewpoint, the substance of the talks was probably less important than the opportunity to establish a closer relationship with Arafat. Moscow presumably harbors some fear that Arafat, like the Egyptians and the Syrians before him, may come to view Washington as holding the key to the achievement of Arab aims. Although Moscow's supply of weaponry to the PLO gives them some influence with Arafat, it by no means precludes his turning to other sources of supply if the Soviets were to make demands that were unacceptable to the PLO. The main purpose of Gromyko's talks with Arafat was probably to help forestall such eventualities.

The Soviet's closer public association with Arafat and the PLO suggests that, at least at this juncture, Moscow is more interested in using the Palestinian question as a vehicle for promoting Soviet influence in the Middle East than as disrupting the movement toward a peaceful settlement. It is conceivable, for example, that Moscow could throw its weight behind the radical fedayeen elements as a way of forestalling or making more difficult any equitable settlement.

The Soviets recognize, however, how difficult it would be to implement such a policy, even if they had an interest in doing so. They have voiced particular frustration with the disunity and factional rivalry within the fedayeen camp.

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attempts to reconcile the fedayeen, either through threats or blandishments, have so far proven unproductive. To a considerable extent then, the Soviets are stuck with Arafat and the PLO. This does not mean that they will abandon the more radical groups, and they will continue to try and get the less intransigent among them to work with Arafat in ways that serve Soviet interests.

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